



Fionn MacCumhaill and the Salmon of Knowledge

As retold by Neil Dennehy

Fado, fado a long time ago before stories were written into books, there lived one of Ireland's most famous heroes – Fionn MacCumhaill. The greatest of people come from the toughest of times and Fionn's story was no different.

You see, back then, Ireland was guarded by the **Fianna**—a band of warrior-hunters sworn to protect the land and its people, answering to honour, courage, and the old laws of the earth.

Cumhaill, leader of the Fianna and chieftain of **Clan Bhaoiscne** was a warrior of great renown—fierce in battle, fair in judgment, and deeply loved by those who followed him. But power draws envy and even the great men of the Fianna could be led astray by jealousy.

Among the Fianna was another clan, **Clan MacMoirne**, led by the formidable **Goll MacMoirne** who came to believe, with others whispering in his ears of course, that he should lead the Fianna. Once an ally, Goll became a rival, and betrayal and ambition overcame loyalty. Cumhaill fell in battle, struck down by Goll MacMoirne himself.

Muirne, Cumhaill's wife, was pregnant with their first child, though she had told no one. She knew only too well that Goll MacMoirne would not allow any son, or daughter of Cumhaill to survive that might come seeking revenge, or perhaps even the title of chieftain.

With no other options, Muirne in the dark of night with only a small ration of food to sustain her, fled into the wild heart of the island. She crossed rivers without bridges and walked beneath moonless skies. At last, she reached the deep forests of the Slieve Bloom mountains shared by the counties Laois and Offaly, where no man lived.

Now, I said no man lived there, but I didn't say nobody. You see two women, who had no time for men and their games of power had made their home together in these very woods.

And these were no ordinary women...

The first was **Liath Luachra**, the grey lady of Luachair, a warrior woman and a hunter of great strength and even sharper will. She had fought and hunted beside the men of the Fianna and got the better of many of them. She feared neither blade nor beast.

The second was **Bodhmall**, a druid woman - a keeper of the old knowledge, She knew the secrets of ogham, prophecy, and the gentle magic of the land whispered only to those who would be still and listen.

They gave Muirne refuge and she stayed with them until her child, a boy was born. But, knowing she could not protect him from Goll MacMoirne and his Clan, the young mother left him in the care of Liath Luachra and Bodhmall. Together, these two women gave him a home and loved him as their own. In fact, it's said that when his long life was lived, he insisted that he would be laid to rest on a peak of the Slieve Bloom mountains, near Mountrath, overlooking what he always considered his homeplace.

They named him **Deimne**, which comes from an old Irish word for certainty, but can also mean little deer. Bodhmall, with her powers of prophecy was certain that this little one was destined for greatness.

Deimne grew as wild, strong and steadfast as the mountains themselves. All his time spent playing and then training in the hills, breathing rich forest air, drinking from crystal clear streams, eating wild berries, nuts and the freshest of fish and game nourished his body, mind and spirit.

From **Liath Luachra**, he learned how to survive.

She taught him how to track animals from stories written in bent grass and disturbed earth ... to throw a spear the length of a football field and split an apple in half, to run for miles over rock, mud, leaf and stream, without missing a step or making a sound ... and to stand his ground against wolves, boars and bears when fear rose in his chest and his heart pounded like a drum.

From **Bodhmall**, he learned a different strength.

She taught him the names and the ways of plants—those that healed and those that harmed. She showed him how bark, berries, roots and leaves could soothe fever, dull pain, heal a wound or bring sleep. She taught him to listen to the land itself and to know where he was and when it was by reading the sun and the stars.

Together, they taught him balance and harmony.

As Deimne grew, so too did his hunger for knowledge. Every answer he received brought two more questions to his mind and a time came when he needed to go beyond his forest home to satisfy his need to learn more about the ways of the world.

Deimne fell in with a **band of traveling bards and poets**, men and women who carried Ireland's memory through stories. They wandered from hall to hall, trading their stories for shelter, wisdom and food.

They taught him the magic of words and poetry which can change minds, hearts and fates. The words we think, speak and believe have great influence and should be chosen wisely.

They taught him of history, bloodlines and alliances, the rise and fall of clans. Through them, Deimne began to understand the wider world that had shaped his own beginnings.

He listened and he watched, as he had in the forests, to the interactions between people, attentive to what was said and what was meant. He learned manners and etiquette, how to carry and conduct himself, when to speak and when to hold his tongue... all very useful for getting on in the world of people.

Now, you might be wondering how it was that Deimne became known as Fionn. And you're right to wonder. And so, I'll tell you.

Like clothes, we wear some names for a while, until they don't really fit anymore. And though he was still destined for greatness, Deimne had long since outgrown "little dear". The bards could see this, so they started to call him Fionn, meaning bright, fair or radiant which fit both his fair hair and features but also his intelligence, clear-mind and open spirit.

It didn't take long for Fionn to learn all the bards could teach him—but still, his hunger remained. There was only one who might be able to teach him more – an old man called **Finneagas**, known by some as Finn – Aonghus, the wisest druid in the land.

For seven years, Finneagas had lived by a beautiful, quiet spot on the River Boyne near Slane castle in the county Meath, waiting.

You see Finneagas, much like Fionn had an insatiable thirst for knowledge and dedicated his whole life to learning. They say it's a wise man that knows he knows very little and Finneagas, for all his knowledge knew there was so much he didn't know... and that there wasn't enough time left to learn it all.

But, in his travels he had come across an ancient prophecy.

It was said that the source of the Boyne river was in the otherworld, a pool of water in a place of magic, surrounded by nine hazel trees that contained the worlds knowledge. The water from this pool flowed into our world, through the River Boyne and into the open sea. Only one creature could travel from the saltwater of the sea, once a year, through the fresh river water, all the way to the source in the otherworld – the salmon. And only salmon had lived long enough to make that journey many times, feeding on the nuts that dropped from the nine hazel trees into the magical pool and absorb all the knowledge they contained. The salmon of knowledge.

The prophecy said that one day, a man called Finn would catch and eat the salmon and have access to all there is to know about any subject. Finn-Aonghus felt it was his destiny.

Now Finneagas was wise enough to know that a salmon with so much knowledge would not be easy to catch. The open sea was far too big and dangerous for an old druid to go fishing and the magical source could not be reached by any mortal, so he walked the length of the Boyne, on both sides 3 times before he chose a spot. He needed the river to be narrow, shallow, slow moving, with space on the bank for a camp and plenty of woodland to forage for food.

He expected to be there for quite some time. And so he was. The clever salmon knew of every lure, line, net and trap that Finneagas used to try and trap him and could easily make his way through. When Finneagas stood upright in the water, the bold salmon would swim under his legs and when he crouched down, the cunning fish would jump over his shoulder, slapping his face with a cold, scaly tail as he passed. Finneagas was often soaked from diving after the salmon, always missing him by a hair's breadth.

When Fionn arrived, Finneagas was tired and had been so focused on fishing that he hadn't really taken care of himself or his camp. Fionn's polite offer to hunt, cook, and clean in return for some share of his wisdom sounded like a good deal and Finneagas didn't take much convincing.

Truth be told, Finneagas was glad to have the company of a thoughtful young man with a keen intellect. Two heads are better than one, he thought. Maybe they would succeed together where he failed alone. Between them they devised ingenious new methods to improve their chances of catching the salmon with strategically placed rocks, nets, traps and lures.

One day, at long last, despite the salmon's knowledge or maybe because it knew of its fate and allowed it to happen, Finneagas finally caught the salmon when it jumped over Fionn and straight into his hands. If he didn't know better, he'd swear the fish winked at him as Finneagas held him up in victory.

Overcome with joy, he instructed Fionn to build a fire, bring out the special pan, prepare the fish in herbs, mushrooms and root vegetables. Most importantly, Fionn was told to cook it very. Very carefully—and warned him not to taste even a scrap. Fionn was happy to do this as he greatly admired his teacher and wanted him to enjoy this meal he had waited so long for.

As Fionn cooked the fish, the natural fish oils, that to this day are known to be super brain-food, became hot and some started to bubble and create a blister under the salmon's skin. Seeing this and wanting the fish's skin to look perfect for Finneagas, Fionn pressed the bubble down with his right thumb, which burst and covered the tip of his thumb with boiling hot oil. Fionn did what anyone would do instinctively, he sucked his thumb and blew cold air on it and shook it out several times until the pain eased.

Then he brought perfectly pan-fried fish surrounded by beautifully arranged vegetable to Finneagas who licked his lips, carved out a large, tender chunk and popped it into his mouth. He savoured the delicious flavour, chewed carefully and swallowed. And he waited... Aside from the lingering flavour and warm sensation in his belly, he didn't feel any different. He had another bite... Again, no change. He took a piece from the tail, then near the neck, turned it over on the other side. Still nothing.

Of course, prophecies aren't always clear, and it didn't say where in the fish its knowledge was held. Perhaps all the fish had to be eaten to gain its knowledge. It took him most of the day, when the meat was gone, he kept going... He wouldn't give in... he ate the fins, the tail, the bones and even the head until there was nothing left... But still he felt no wiser.

Finneagas wondered if it would have to be fully digested, so he slept and waited for 3 days... sure he didn't have anything else to do now anyway. On the fourth day he started to feel hungry again, so he sat with Fionn for some lunch and watched the young man, knowing he was trustworthy but feeling that something must have gone wrong.

Finneagas leaned forward, looked Fionn in the eye and calmly asked him. "Are you sure you didn't eat any of the salmon before me". "I swear, on my honour, I didn't" ... Finneagas knew the fish was perfect with no parts missing when Fionn presented it to him.

"Talk me through everything that happened when you prepared the fish Fionn". Fionn recalled in great detail how he set the fire, cleaned the pad, gathered the herbs and vegetables, carefully turned the fish to cook it evenly... how it blistered and burnt his thumb, but that it was ok because he cooled it quickly ...

Finneagas sat back in his chair and let out a big sigh as he realised what had happened. Fionn, by sucking the oil from his thumb had been first to taste the salmon of knowledge. Fionn, would be pronounced Finn in some places and Finneagas was wise enough to accept that fate was waiting for this young man to come along and fulfil the prophecy. Finneagas had grown fond of him and wouldn't want anyone else other than himself, of course go gain the world's knowledge.

When he explained all this to him, Fionn said, "but I don't feel any wiser or know any more than I did a few days ago?". Finneagas thought for a moment. "Try putting your right thumb in your mouth. Fionn did as asked, sat bold upright with wide eyes as his mind expanded to hold all the knowledge of the world. He knew the names of all things in all languages, how they worked, where they were in that moment, had been before and were likely to be in the future. He saw the connections between all things, patterns in chaos and cycles days, years and centuries and how nothing truly ends... everything simply changes to become something new. He knew river from source to sea, mountain from valley to peak, tree from root to tip, bird, beast and insect. Before a question even formed in his mind, the answer instantly became clear. He knew it all.

When he removed his thumb, the knowledge would fade slowly like waking from a dream with only slivers remaining of the most recent part and he described this as best he could Finneagas.

From that day on, Fionn MacCumhaill carried the Salmon's gift. By pressing his thumb, to the roof of his mouth he could access the well of knowledge within him. With focus and practice he could hold what onto what he needed to know after, long enough to write it down or put it to good use.

His training with his foster mothers - Liath Luachra and Bodhmall, the poets and bards, lords and ladies and Finneagas himself gave Fionn the skills to handle his new power and put it to good use.

And so began the legend of Fionn MacCumhaill—warrior, poet, leader who would go on to do great things but sin sceal eile, don huair eile – that's another story for another time...

Slan go foill...